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Identifiers-Linguistic Continuum, Linguistic Variables

In this paper the author provides a brief overview of some of the ways in which recent sociolinguistic research is contributing to our knowledge of language teaching. The focus is on the American urban situation, especially as it relates to poor black children. One of the greatest deterrents to describing such situation has been our lack of tools and frameworks for studies to be made. The concepts noted in this paper--the linguistic continuum, the linguistic variable, and the linguistic situation--coupled with the development of quantitative measurement in linguistic analysis and a wider approach to fieldwork are leading to a realistic assessment of the social dimension of language. Certain pedagogical strategies are growing naturally out of this research, for it is obvious that a more detailed analysis of the feature being taught will suggest aspects to follow or avoid. A careful analysis of the focus and target forms suggests that foreign language teaching techniques be considered in bidialectal or biloquial education. The exact ways to apply these techniques to native language learning have not been found, and it appears clear that some of these techniques (such as repetition drills) may not be very useful. Suprisingly, we have learned that even the linguistic research that is being done suggests strategies for pedagogy, especially in the sequencing of lessons with these stigmatized features. (Author/JD)

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The Relevance of Sociolinguistics for Language Teaching

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For many years now linguists have been interested in the phenomenon of language and society, particularly where whole systems of language are seen in relation to whole systems of culture. Linguistic geographers, of course, have long been observing a type of small group language dynamics based on geography and history. Then, in the thirties, Hans Kurath introduced the dimension of the social group to the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada, although his criteria for social marking was never very popular with other sciences.

What Sociolinguistics Is and Does

Sociolinguists are generally concerned with the social implications of the use and reception of language. They carry out basic research on language variation, sensitivity and acquisition among social groups of all types including those based on social status, age, race, sex, family, friendship units and others. Some of the topics of sociolinguistic include dialect geography, bilingualism, linguistic interference, social dialectology (including studies of social stratification and minority group speech), language situations (language rivalries, standardization, language as a means of group identification and functional styles), and attitudes toward language.

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In order to accommodate these topics, sociolinguists have borrowed research techniques from other disciplines and have developed some new analytical modes of their own. It has been necessary, for example, to reconceptualize linguistic data as part of a continuum rather than as isolated phenomena. The occurrence of a grammatical feature, for example, can no longer be interpreted on a purely qualitative basis, as it once was. Realizing that speakers of a language, standard or nonstandard, exist in a continuum, sociolinguists find it necessary to use quantitative as well as qualitative analyses in order to determine the frequency with which any given form occurs in the speech of an individual. This notion of the linguistic continuum enables us to conceive of groups of individuals with similar or identical continua as linguistically homogeneous.

The notion of the linguistic variable, first formulated by William Labov, enables sociolinguists to account for continuous ordered variation within linguistic features (Labov 1966). Past practice was to consider exceptions to the regular patterns as free variation, a term somewhat analogous to what fifth grade children call the remainder in a long division problem. In formulating the concept of the linguistic variable, Labov sought to correlate matters hitherto dismissed as free variation with such social characteristics as social status, race, sex, age and style. When language is viewed as code (as linguists historically treat it), free variation continues to be a valid analytical tool. But when language is seen as behavior (as sociolinguists view it), free variation can be accounted for more adequately.

The linguistic situation is another of the concepts developed by sociolinguists. John Gumperz, for example, utilized the concept of a communication network, particularly a friendship network, to investigate linguistic code-switching between local and prestige dialects in India. Labov (1966) and Wolfram (1969) have made detailed analyses of the realization of certain grammatical and phonological features across speech contexts such as casual, formal and oral reading.

From other disciplines, linguists have been borrowing heavily, especially in matters of research design, cognition, statistical analyses, attitude measurement and demography.

Identifying the Issues: Systematicity

Of the several ways in which sociolinguistic research is relevant to language teaching the most obvious is that of identifying the issues. Please note that I do not use the term problem here, for linguistic research is not, in itself, evaluative. An investigation may clearly reveal that speakers of one social class use a linguistic form far more frequently than it is used by speaker of another socio-economic status. To the linguists this fact is one of descriptive difference and neither group of speakers is thought of as aberrant. Certain educators and psychologists who have been publishing their recent research on the disadvantaged child conceive of a single scale for all speakers of a language, leading them to refer to the black child's speech as deviant from the standard norm. (Bereiter 1966, Deutch 1964) The sociolinguist will observe, instead, that the linguistic system of speakers of one group may differ from the lin-

guistic system of speakers of another group. To one extent, members of either group may be disadvantaged in their attempts at communicating with the other. This is not to deny that it may be desirable for speakers of the lower socio-economic group to learn the system which will enable them to survive and thrive in a larger context. But it does suggest that the teacher's and researcher's relationship to that linguistic system begin with a recognition of its adequacy, perhaps even beauty. Furthermore, this recognition of the adequate systematicity of this linguistic system suggests that measurement of the nonstandard speaker's auditory discrimination, reading ability, intelligence, achievement, or any other aspect of his education be done in such a way that a true measurement of these things can be attained. One would hope, for example, that a child's inability to produce or recognize a contrast between /I/ and /ɛ/ before nasal consonants, as in pin vs. pen, would not be considered failure if, within his linguistic system, such a contrast does not exist. One would also hope that his inability to produce or recognize such a contrast would not be considered inadequate auditory discrimination. One would further hope that this inability would not be attributed to excessive noise in his lower socio-economic home, the blare of television or the squalor of ghetto life. Just as it would seem ludicrously unfair to label all orientals as deficient in hearing because they have difficulty with English /r/ and /l/, it is unfortunate that speakers of nonstandard English are said to have difficulty discriminating a dialect which has a somewhat different system from their own. The subtle distinctions produced by some Southerners in the words, a hired man, a hod man, a hard man, a Howard man and a hide man might easily be used against testors who fail to account for systematic dialect differences in auditory

discrimination tests (McDavid 1969).

As for other standardized tests, one can only wonder how much better black children would do on measures of verbal skills, intelligence and achievement if linguistic and cultural differences were accounted for in the production of these tests.

One issue in which sociolinguistic research can be helpful in language teaching, then, is in identifying the issue of the systematicity of the language under investigation and how this systematicity may interfere with the educator's attempt to use a child's language in measuring intelligence, perception or various skills. This recognition is long overdue in almost every aspect of standarized testing the American schools.

Linguistic Features

Sociolinguists are also deeply involved in identifying and analyzing the linguistic features which set off one social group from another. Although there are currently available several "grocery lists" of features said to be characteristic of nonstandard English, they generally tend to oversimplify and frequently are misleading (Non-Standard Dialects 1968, is a case in point).

An important question, of course, is: "How much do we need to know about a linguistic feature in order to teach about it?" In this respect, the "grocery lists" are extremely useful, for earlier research by Anne E. Hughes has clearly revealed the general inability of teachers even to identify the features which they consider problems in their students' speech (Hughes, 1967). Only 10% of the Teachers in Hughes' study of Detroit Head Start Teachers showed clear evidence of understanding that the so-called non-verbal child has a language which may be perfectly appropriate for certain, but not all,

circumstances in life. One third of the teachers characterized the disadvantaged child's greatest problem as his failure to speak in sentences and/or complete thoughts. Other common observations about the language of the disadvantaged child included statements about their limited vocabulary, their slurring words together and their dropping ends of words. Even though 40% of the teachers recognized that their students have some sort of unusual phonological activity at the ends of words, not one could describe these features in terms satisfactory enough to be diagnostically useful. What is even more distressing is that 13% of these teachers observe that disadvantaged children do not talk at all and 10% observe that these students do not talk at home.

This inability of teachers to describe nonstandard language with any degree of diagnostic usefulness has suggested that we try to discover the vocabulary of socially meaningful terms with which people can evaluate speech. Labov observed this phenomenon in his study of the subjective reactions to language of New Yorkers (1966: 405). Recent research in Detroit used the semantic differential scale using polar adjectives as a device for laymen to express their evaluations of tape recorded speech segments (Shuy, Baratz and Wolfram, 1969). For each segment, listener-judges were asked to use the following scale:

awkward	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	graceful
relaxed	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	tense
formal	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	informal
thin	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	thick
correct	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	___:	incorrect

These and ten other scales were also used in conjunction with the judges' assessment of various speech concepts (Detroit Speech, Negro Speech, White Southern Speech, British Speech and Standard Speech) in an effort to discover meaningful terminology by which laymen can talk about social distinctions in language.

While this research into the vocabulary of meaningful terms for identifying social features of speech in conducted, linguists are slowly and painstakingly describing the linguistic features themselves. Labov's analysis of five phonological features in New York speech was published in 1966. Wolfram has recently completed an analysis of four phonological and four grammatical features of Detroit Negro speech (Wolfram, 1969). Shuy, Wolfram and Riley dealt with two grammatical features and one phonological feature (in addition to some preliminary analyses of syntax) in the Detroit Dialect Study (Shuy, Wolfram and Riley, 1967). Fasold has done preliminary research on the low vowel system of a cross-section of Detroiters (Fasold, 1968) and is currently studing various features in Washington, D.C. Now Labov has extended his New York research to include several more features in New York (Labov, 1968) and Crockett and Levine have added to our knowledge of r, particularly in the Piedmont (Levine and Crockett, 1966). With all of this research, however, comes several important questions. How generalizable are any of these descriptions from one city to another? Although all of the aforementioned linguists are dealing with a broad section of the population, the clear focus has been on the speech of minority groups and further research must be done on the speech of the middle classes, Southern whites and rural Negroes, to mention only a few groups, in order for us to get a clearer focus of our target group in a realistic linguistic context. Furthermore,

not all of the analyses done thus far are in complete agreement with each other. Research on invariant _be_ in Negro speech, for example, has thus far yielded as many analyses as there are analysts.[1]

To the casual observer, it may seem that these features are really no different then those noted in the "grocery list" approach criticized earlier in this paper. And, to a certain extent, this is true. One example of the difference, however, may be noted. In the New York City Board of Education's _Non-Standard Dialect_ it is reported that for nonstandard speakers the -st cluster reduces to -s in words like _test_, _toast_ and _ghost_ (p. 13). In fact, however, this reduction also characterizes standard English speakers in the environment before consonants. The grocery list is partly right but it does not tell the whole story either.

It may be concluded then, that if materials developers had only the analysis found in _Non-Standard Dialects_, they would not know exactly what the child's beginning point really is and they would not know enough about the relationship between the environmental constraints and the social status of the speaker in order to focus and sequence the materials effectively. Much of the sociolinguistic analysis noted earlier addresses itself specifically to these and other relationships.

Determining Strategies

Besides contributing to our knowledge of the systematic nature of a language and identifying the linguistic features which contrast between language systems, sociolinguistic research has certain things

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1. As soon as possible these various analyses will be published in the Urban Language Series at the Center for Applied Linguistics under the tentative title, _Current Viewpoints Toward Nonstandard "Be"_ (eds. Shuy and Fasold).

to say about strategies for presenting these facts. For example, knowledge about how people react to language features gives us insight for classroom engineering on the basis of what is generally considered most crucial or most stigmatizing. This kind of information is of utmost importance if we are to avoid spending time teaching against features which the general public does not recognize as stigmatizing.

1. Discovering Cruciality

Insight of this sort, for example, has been revealed in what might be called a heirarchy of cruciality concerning the three generally recognized categories of language: lexicon, phonology and grammar. Much of the currently available oral language materials for poor black children focusses on matters of pronunciation (Golden 1965, Lin 1964, Hurst 1965). This is perhaps excusable, for the demand for materials always precedes the demand for research upon which materials are based. At the time in which this demand first began to be satisfied it appeared to many people that teaching standard English to nonstandard speakers involved primarily teaching them to pronounce English in a standard manner. Once sociolinguistic research into non-standard English began, however, it became clear that the mainstream of American society tolerates phonological variation considerably more than it tolerates grammatical variation.[2] To be sure, there are certain pronunciation variants which are more stigmatized than others, just as there are certain grammatical variations which seem more tolerable than others.

This measure of the tolerance range of social acceptability for linguistic features is extremely difficult to calculate and, at present we can do little more than speculate about how it might be established.

2. It would appear, in addition, that lexical variations tend to be the most tolerated of all.

It involves seeing the linguistic feature in relationship to a number of complicated matrices such as social class, situation (small group context), style (narration, reading, etc.), frequency distribution of the feature and delineation of the exact linguistic environment in which the feature occurs. Social Class. The matrix of social class is described extensively by Labov (1966, 1968) by Shuy, Wolfram and Riley (1967), by Shuy, Baratz and Wolfram (1969) and by Wolfram (1969).

It is not our intention to detail the techniques or results of these research projects here but rather only to generalize that in both their objective use of language and in their subjective reactions to language, people of different socio-economic groups tend to perform differently. Labov observes that although their language usage shows considerable class stratification, people of all social classes seem to share similar norms about language (Labov 1966: 450). This would suggest that all classes have similar tolerance ranges when listening to the stigmatized linguistic features. On the other hand Shuy, Wolfram and Riley suggest that clues to social sensitivity can be found also in the oral production of these forms as they are seen in relation to certain social characteristics (1967: III, 67). They observe that the contrast of the sharp social stratification observable, for example, in multiple negation with the gradual or gradient stratification found for pronominal apposition reflects a generally sharper sensitivity for the feature which is most clearly stratified. This sensitivity may be a measure of group tolerance of a feature. That is, on the basis of the sharp stratification observed for multiple negation one would predict a general intolerance for this feature in the speech of those who do not use it. On the contrary, the general insensitivity to pronominal apposition would probably make this feature more tolerable.

But whatever the methods for discerning it are, social class certainly must enter into any measure of the tolerance range of acceptability.

Situation. The matrix of linguistic situation is tremendously important for any accurate assessment of the social stigmatization of a linguistic feature. Although very little more than exploratory and programmatic information exists in this area, it seems obvious that people talk somewhat differently in different social groups. Early research which attempts to obtain information of this sort has been done by Gumperz (1964) in India and considerable current thinking on this subject has been done by Hymes (1964) and Ervin-Tripp (1968).

Style. Style is another matrix in which the social tolerance range can be observed. An example of this kind of research can be seen in Wolfram 1969) who computed the frequency distribution of various grammatical and phonological features across the styles of narrative and oral reading observing, in each case, a greater tendency toward the mainstream norm in the reading style.

Frequency Distribution. Frequency distribution, itself, provides a matrix for measuring this range of social tolerance. Noting that the mere occurrence of a linguistic feature is ambiguous unless it is seen in relationship to a constant, Shuy, Wolfram and Riley utilize the concept of the potential occurrence (1967: III, 9). That is, each occurrence of a stigmatized feature such as multiple negation before indefinites is seen in relation to all occasions in which multiple negatives might have occurred in that position. The resulting ratio provides a measurable and meaningful indication of frequency distribution.

Environment. The need for observing the exact linguistic environment in which the stigmatized feature occurs is perhaps the most crucial matrix of all. If we are to say anything meaningful about the tolerance

range of social stigmatization we must by all means, set the feature in its proper linguistic environment. Otherwise our observation will be no more precise or useful than those of the Detroit teacher who stated that children in her class drop the endings of words. Research on simplification (or reduction) of syllable final consonant clusters is a case in point. It is useless to note the reduction of -st clusters to -s before alveolars or voiceless fricatives. As noted earlier, Standard English speakers, in most styles and situations, will delete the /t/ in these environments. Although it is linguistically accurate (in terms of language as code) to do so, it would be sociolinguistically (in term of language as behavior) meaningless to simply say that t is deleted in final st clusters. More useful would be to state a sociolinguistic rule for which there is some sort of contrast between different groups of speakers.

The matrices in which a tolerance range of social stigmatization or acceptability must be measured, than, include social class, situation, style, frequency distribution and linguistic environment. Once a given feature has been set in these matrices, perhaps we can more precisely and realistically observe its tolerance range. Such an observation might tell us, for example, that the consonant cluster reduction rule operates primarily with the working classes, especially in peer speech and to a lesser extent in group-external speech, more strongly in the casual style but, to a slightly lesser extent in the careful or consultative style as well, to a specified frequency distribution and in the linguistic environment preceeding vowels or silence. A really useful statement, of course, would replace the phrases, primarily, especially, lesser-extant, more strongly, slightly lesser-extant and specified in the preceeding sentence with some more

precise quantitative information. The contrast between the items in each matrix would then specify the tolerance range between items.

2. Preparing Teachers and Materials

Once the basic sociolinguistic research has identified and fully described the linguistic features to be taught and set them in a realistic tolerance range based on factors of social class, situation, style, frequency distribution and linguistic environment, we are ready to think about methods of teaching (this is not to say that any teaching must wait until such analyses are finished. Rather it suggests that if this research is done first we will be better able to do this teaching).

As in the case of most basic research of this sort, not all knowledge is directly transferable to students and not all of it is necessary for teachers to know. Materials developers stand to benefit the most, for they can use this kind of information 1.) to zero in precisely on the speakers who have these stigmatized features, 2.) to put these feature in their realistic language situations, 3.) to anticipate variation according to the constraints of style, 4.) to build materials around the realistic concept of contrastive frequency distributions rather than consistent presence or complete absence of a feature and 5.) to construct exercises which utilize the detailed description of the feature in its linguistic environment, avoiding overgeneralizations of the sort found in the "grocery list" approaches noted earlier.

Teachers, however, also require considerable attention in the use of such knowledge. Currently most teachers are trained in the single standard approach to language variation. Of considerable value would be pre-service training in language varieties based on

both geography and socio-economic status. And while we are at it, why not let them in on what we know about language variety based on style (Joos 1965), race (Wolfram 1969, Shuy 1969a), sex (Shuy 1969b) and age (Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1968)? Somewhere in their training, teachers should be disencumbered from many of the current fashionable ideas about the so-called non-verbal child (Deutch, 1964) and about the language based cognitive deficits black children are supposed to have (Bereiter, 1966). It would be extremely useful, in fact, if these teachers would be given a chance to hear black children talk outside of a school context. Even the laboratory experience of sitting and listening to long tape recorded narrations would be a step in the right direction. Of course, a step by step analysis of the linguistic features of nonstandard English would be helpful in demonstrating the systematicity of this kind of language as well as details of how it works. One important danger of such training, however, is the implication that once trained such teachers are immediately transformed in attitude and competence or that their training automatically enables them to construct adequate classroom materials. On the contrary, such training is only the requisite beginning step that educators must take. In an area in which attitudes have been in-grained for so many years we cannot expect immediate renewal even after the new knowledge has been acquired. And as for the construction of classroom materials, let us not delude ourselves into believing that even a well trained teacher with healthy attitudes is competent to produce good or usable classroom materials. Yet this assumption is widely held today and is manifested in countless summer workshops in which the aim is to get teachers together to produce the curriculum for the following year. Students in a Shakespeare course may be able to

write a sonnet but their product is in no way expected to compete with those of their model. Why it is that the teaching profession has assumed that teachers are, per se, materials developers is a mystery to many people.

3. Finding Clues to Sequencing the Instruction

Wolfram has recently observed that since some features of non-standard are more socially obtrusive than others, they should be given precedence in the teaching materials (Wolfram, 1969). He also deals with the problems of the relative social diagnosticity of items as they intersect with other social and linguistic principles such as the generality of rules, the potential frequency of items. Wolfram also suggests that since grammatical features tend to stratify the population more sharply than phonological features, the standard English equivalent of non-standard grammatical categories should be introduced first.

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to provide a brief overview of some of the ways in which recent sociolinguistic research is contributing to our knowledge of language teaching. The focus has been on the American urban situation, especially as it relates to poor black children. Although we as yet have no empirical evidence for support, these contributions seem to be generalizable to social dialect differences in other languages as well. One of the greatest deterrants to describing such situations in the past has been our lack of tools and frameworks in which such studies could be made. The concepts noted in this paper, the linguistic continuum, the linguistic variable and the linguistic situation, coupled with the development of quantitative measurement in linguistic analysis and a wider approach to linguistic fieldwork (accounting for a broad spectrum of socio-economic groups and styles) are leading to a realistic assessment of the social dimension of language.

Certain pedagogical strategies are growing naturally out of this research, for it is obvious that a more detailed analysis of the feature being taught will suggest aspects to follow and thing to avoid. Furthermore, a careful analysis of the essential contrasts between the focus and target forms suggests that foreign language teaching techniques be seriously considered in bidialectal or biloquial education (Stewart, 1964). The exact ways in which these techniques can be applied to native language learning are still not formulated but, at this stage, it appears clear that some of these techniques, including repetition drills, are not very useful and that we face a number of different problems in developing a second dialect learning pedagogy. Surprisingly, perhaps, we have learned that even

the linguistic analysis in our research suggests strategies for pedagogy, especially in the sequencing of lessons dealing with these stigmatized features.

As is often the case at the beginning of research fields such as this, the investigating scholars are humbled at the enormity of the problem. But the excitement of discovery shows no signs of wearing off and, if the rest of the academic community will have patience with us, we should be able to add a significant dimension to the extant knowledge of language teaching.

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